DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 339 126 EA 023 512

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TITLE The Leadership Function of School Boards: West Virginia Data.
PUB DATE Nov 91
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southern Regional Council for Educational Administration (Auburn, AL, November 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Responsibility; *Administrator Role; *Boards of Education; *Decision Making; Elementary Secondary Education; Local Issues; *Organizational Communication; *Problem Solving
IDENTIFIERS *West Virginia

ABSTRACT

This study, proposed by the West Virginia School Boards Association at the request of the West Virginia Legislature's Oversight Committee was designed to examine the kinds of decisions and nature of actions of local school boards in West Virginia between July 1985 and July 1990. A qualitative research design consisting of emergent category analysis of the minutes of local school board meetings identified commonalities in decisions made and actions taken. A random sample of the minutes of two meetings by each of 55 school boards was conducted (n=110). Findings indicate that financial and personnel issue were the first and second most frequent areas of decision-making. Since 26.6% of all decisions concerned financial matters, especially Budget Supplement and Transfer decisions, it was recommended that school boards and superintendents receive training in budgeting and planning, both long and short term. It was further recommended that public interaction/presentation at meetings be encouraged and that boards receive training in school/community relations. In addition, it was recommended that boards: received training on policy creation and oversight and in the consent agenda process. (23 references) (LMI)

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Regional Council on Educational administration

Auburn Alabama - November 11, 1991

EA 023512

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THE LEADERSHIP FUNCTION OF SCHOOL BOARDS: WEST VIRGINIA DATA

Purpose of the Study

This study, proposed by the West Virginia School Boards Association (WVSBA) at the request of the West Virginia Legislature's Oversight Commission on Education Accountability (LOCEA), was designed to examine the kinds of decisions and nature of actions of local school boards in West Virginia between July, 1985 and July, 1990. It should be noted that this is a study of the decision types reported in minutes of school board meetings rather than analysis of the amount of time spent by boards in making any specific decisions. This final report was prepared for presentation at the January 6, 1991 meeting of the LOCEA. The findings, and the recommendations which follow, point toward areas of needed assistance and training for local school boards.

Introduction

When one searches the current literature relative to school boards and their operations, it becomes eminently clear that there is a lack of empirical data about how boards operate and the type and frequency of their decisions. The literature, however, is replete with advice from board members and school superintendents as to how boards should organize their activities, what they should do, how they

can plan and assume leadership, and how boards and school administrators should coexist.

Advice to board members in the literature contains references to picking a board president (Heller, Katz, 1985), preparing for meetings (Berkowitz, 1988; Herman, 1990; Pressley, 1988) and the conducting of meetings (Gross, 1986; Herman, 1990, Rogers, 1989; Zakariya, 1985). There is, additionally, a large number of articles which consist of helpful "tips" on being a good school board member (Billings, 1989; Ficklen, 1985; McCormick, 1985, Thomas, 1985; Wellborn, 1986). In none of the above references are any of the opinions data based. The advice is based solely on the experiences of the authors as they behaved either as a board member or school administrator.

Additionally, the literature is replete with statements as to how and why school boards should assume a leadership role in their communities (Bippus, 1985; Carver, 1987; Lewis, 1989, Pratt, 1989). Another significant section of the literature deals with board/superintendent relationships (Berkowitz, 1988, Bisso, 1988, Freund, 1988, Griffith, 1990). A final segment of the literature deals with the need for boards to plan (Essex and Bishop, 1986; McElrath, 1990; Tollet, 1990) and develop their own abilities (Namit, 1989).

To sum, the current literature relative to school boards consists of advice and opinions of practitioners that are entirely based upon their experiences. No empirical data documents what school boards actually do, the types of decisions they actually make, and the frequency at which they do these things. The paucity of these kinds of data led the researchers to the present study.

Methodology

The researchers used a qualitative research design consisting of emergent category analysis of the minutes of local school board meetings to identify commonalities in decisions made and actions taken. It was determined by WVSBA that the period of most interest would be July 1985 to July 1990. The total number of regular monthly school board meetings, therefore meeting minutes, possible for all 55 local school boards for this period was calculated to be 3300 (N=3300). The researchers determined that a random sample of the minutes of two meetings provided by each school board (n=110) would be sufficient to describe common actions and decisions of West Virginia school boards during the period. Local school board presidents received a letter from the chairpersons of the House and Senate Education Committees to introduce the study and to request board cooperation. Each of the 55 district superintendents then received a letter from the researchers asking that the minutes of two school board meetings, for which the randomly assigned dates were specified, be mailed to the researchers for analysis. The request was made to superintendents since it was believed they would have greater access to the minutes. Local school board presidents were copied on the letter. All 55 school districts complied and provided minutes for the two school board meetings specified. Many provided all meeting information sheets.

Researchers, upon reviewing the minutes, identified ten categories of common decisions and actions emerging from the data, conducted a trial analysis to reach interrater reliability, then categorized all actions and decisions described in the 110 minutes provided. Board decisions were determined to revolve around ten (10) issues. These issues were finance, personnel, permissions, presentations to the board, students, executive sessions, awards/recognitions, policy develop-

ment and oversight, textbooks/curriculum, and legal issues. A listing of decisions falling outside the ten emergent categories were determined to be labeled as "Other", and arrayed along with the categorical data using frequency distributions and percentages. A total of 1709 decisions or actions were recorded and categorized.

Major Findings

TABLE 1

Emergent Categories of Decisions with Frequencies and Percentages of the Total Number Taken from a Sample of West Virginia School Board Meeting Minutes July 1985 - July 1990

Category of Decision		Frequency	Percentage of Total
1. Finance			
a) Budget Supplements/Transfers	(32.5%)	148	
b) Expenditures/Supplies/Transportation	(41.5%)	189	
c) Buildings/Capital Improvements	(30.0%)	118	
		—	(26.6%)
2. Personnel		316	(18.5%)
3. Permissions			
a) Field Trips		70	
b) Facility Use/Bus Use		80	
c) Professional Development Opportunities		59	
d) Other		4	
		213	(12.5%)
4. Presentations to the Board			
a) Public	(23%)	47	
b) Staff	(77%)	160	
		207	(12.1%)
5. Students		77	(5%)
6. Executive Sessions			
a) Personnel		49	
b) Land		2	
c) No Reason Given		20	
		71	(4%)

7.	Awards/Recognition	54	(3%)
8.	Policy Development and Oversight	50	(3%)
9.	Textbooks/Curriculum	32	(2%)
10.	Legal Issues	19	(1%)
11.	Other	215	(13%)
	Grand Total	1,709	

Category 11 - - Other Actions/Decisions

Ranked by frequency from most often mentioned (#1) to least often mentioned (#12)

1. Approval of plans or reports
2. Setting of meeting dates
3. Board questions or discussion
4. Board being appointed or appointing members to committees
5. Easements
6. Surrogate parent approval
7. Transportation
8. Making Proclamations
9. Communication with West Virginia Department of Education
10. Setting agenda
11. West Virginia School Boards Association
12. Changing calendars

As indicated in Table 1, over one-fourth (26.6%) of all decisions made by school boards concern Financial decisions, the most common types being budget supplements/transfers; expenditures/supplies/transportation; and buildings/capital improvements. Two-thirds of the Financial decisions involve "paying the bills" or current expenses and building and capital improvements while one-third concern the movement of funds between categories. (budget supplements/transfers constitute 32.5% of Finance decisions).

Personnel was the second most common decisional area. The majority of these decisions were hiring and transfer of personnel. Other decisions in this area included resignations, terminations, supplemental contracts, and leaves of absence. Boards differed in their approaches to Personnel decisions. Some boards used a consent agenda approach to consider the recommendations of the superintendent while others decided each Personnel decision independently.

The emergent category of third highest frequency of decisions was the Granting of Permissions, which comprised one-eighth (12.5%) of all decisions made by the 55 school boards. Within that category, the granting of permission to use school buses or take students on field trips were the most commonly made decisions. Of the emergent subcategories, the granting of permission for staff to participate in professional development opportunity comprised only 59 decisions of 213 in the category, or approximately 3% of all 1709 decisions.

The next highest decisional category was Presentations to the Board (12.1% of all decisions). Presentations by staff, including the superintendent, outnumbered those by the public by over 3 to 1 (160 by staff compared to 47 by the public).

The above categories compose approximately 69% of all decisions reported in the minutes studied. Other findings of note in remaining categories are described below.

Decisions made regarding Students most frequently involved permissions to attend school within the district or to transfer districts, suspensions and expulsions, or transfers to an out-of-area school within the district. Decisions considered in Policy Development and Oversight included creation of new policy, amending of policy, and review of current policy. The remaining category headings are Textbooks, Curriculum and other.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The following Conclusions and Recommendations are offered based upon these findings and the researchers' analysis of the 110 minutes from the 55 school boards.

1. Findings for **category 1 a.** indicate a large number of Budget Supplement and Transfer decisions were necessary, perhaps due to poor advance planning and budgeting. It is recommended that school boards and superintendents receive training in budgeting and planning, both long and short term.

2. Findings for **category 4**, Presentations to the Board, indicate that staff, including the superintendent, make the predominance of presentations to the board. It is recommended that boards encourage public interaction/presentation at meetings and receive training in school/community relations.

3. Findings for **categories 1,2, and 3,** Finance, Personnel, and Permissions, indicate that school boards principally make decisions on information presented to them by staff and that board meting agendas are driven by this staff-presented information. It is recommended that boards or board chairpersons receive training on setting agendas. In order that roles be properly clarified, including the policy setting and governing responsibilities, it is further recommended that school boards annually review board member and chairperson responsibilities and superintendent responsibilities to the board.

4. Findings for **categories 2 and 3**, Personnel and Permissions, indicate that boards deal with a great number of individual staff hirings, leaves of absence, professional development opportunities, field trips, bus and facility used, etc., It is recommended that school boards receive training in the consent agenda process and in the differences between governance and administration roles.

5. Findings for **category 8,** Policy Development and Oversight, indicate that the chief policy making bodies for districts, the school boards, make few decisions on the setting or review of school district policy. It is recommended that boards receive training on policy creation and oversight.

6. The paucity of decisions and actions related to board development seems to indicate that this is a low priority for most school boards. It is recommended that school board needs identified by this study, and others currently being conducted, be examined. It is further recommended that members receive information about the importance of periodic board development and training in improved board operations.

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